

MUSEUM THEATRE GUIDE

BACK TO THE BLUEGRASS: MARY TODD LINCOLN COMES HOME

OVERVIEW

Museum theatre characters bring exhibit themes to life through dramatic performances based on the lives of Kentuckians from all walks of life. This presentation features one actress who performs in Area D (“The Antebellum Age”) of the exhibit *A Kentucky Journey*. The fifteen-minute piece is based on biographical sources about the life of Mary Todd Lincoln. A museum staff member is on hand to introduce the play and conduct a discussion after it ends.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Topics

- Women
- Slavery
- Antebellum Era
- Mary Todd Lincoln

Core Content Connections

- Historical Perspective: History is a series of connected events shaped by multiple cause-and-effect relationships, tying the past and the present (SS-M-5.1.3)
- Historical Perspective: Political, social, economic, and cultural differences among sections of the U.S. resulted in the American Civil War (SS-M-5.24)

BACKGROUND

History

Born in Lexington, Kentucky, on December 13, 1818, Mary Todd Lincoln, first lady of the United States, was descended from two of central Kentucky’s best-known families—the Todds and the Parkers. Her mother, Eliza Parker Todd, died in childbirth when Mary was six. Shortly thereafter, her father married Elizabeth Humphreys of Frankfort. Mary lived with them and their children in a brick house at 578 West Main Street in Lexington. After early education at Lexington’s Ward School and the Mentelle boarding school, Mary Todd followed her older sisters to Springfield, Illinois, where she lived with her sister Elizabeth Edwards. In November 1842, she married Abraham Lincoln, then a lawyer who had three times

won election to the state legislature. They had four sons—Robert, Edward, William, and Thomas.

Mary Lincoln lived the typical domestic life of a nineteenth-century, middle-class woman, though she maintained an unusual interest in politics and in her husband’s career as a politician. Her great expectations for her husband were realized when after two unsuccessful campaigns for the U.S. Senate, he was elected president of the United States in November 1860.

During the White House years Mary worked hard to turn it into a fashionable mansion worthy of her husband, herself, and the nation. But the Civil War made these efforts seem frivolous. Throughout the war she was often attacked in the newspapers for her extravagance and for her supposed Confederate allegiance. In fact the first lady (she was the first to be called that) was a staunch Unionist. After the death of her son Willie in 1862, a distraught Mary Lincoln often sought comfort among spiritualists.

Following her husband’s assassination, Mary struggled financially, though she eventually received \$36,000 from her husband’s pension. Following the death of her son Thomas (Tad), Mary suffered periods of extreme grief, which further complicated longtime complaints of severe headaches and emotional disturbances. In 1875 her only surviving son, Robert, committed her to a private asylum, but she was released after only three months. Mary lived in France from 1878 to 1882. She returned to Springfield and died on July 16, 1882.

(From Jean H. Baker’s entry on Mary Todd Lincoln in The Kentucky Encyclopedia, 1992)

Plot

The play takes the form of a conversation with a group of people Mary encounters at her girlhood home when she visits there in 1848. Abraham Lincoln is serving a term in the U.S. House of Representatives and Mary is becoming accustomed to Washington society. She reminisces about her childhood, reflects on her evolving feelings about slavery, alludes to the strain of being a politician’s wife, and displays the broad range of emotions she was known for.

Setting and costumes

Back to the Bluegrass is set in the gardens of the Todd home in Lexington. The actress wears a two-piece dress, a bonnet, and gloves—the proper attire for traveling and paying calls in the antebellum era.

Performance style

The script is presentational in form, with the actress addressing the audience throughout the production.

IN THE MUSEUM

When they arrive in the performance area, students will be asked to sit on the floor. (Limited seating is available for students with special needs and adults.) A museum staff member will provide a brief introduction to the play. After the fifteen-minute performance, the actress will come out of character to participate in a follow-up discussion with the audience.

We rely on teachers and chaperones to make sure students behave well during performances, and we reserve the right to ask disruptive students or classes to leave.

AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

- Show respect for the performers and other museum guests by not talking.
- Do not use recording devices, cameras, or laser-pointers during the performance.
- Do not touch or talking with performers unless instructed or encouraged to do so.

RESOURCES

Websites

Mary Todd Lincoln's Research Site
<http://members.aol.com/RVSNorton/Lincoln15.html>

Mary Todd Lincoln
<http://americancivilwar.com/women/mtl.html>

Books

Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography by Jean Baker (New York, 1989)

Lincoln and the Bluegrass: Slavery and Civil War in Kentucky by William H. Townsend
(Lexington, 1989)

Documentaries

Abraham and Mary Lincoln: A House Divided,
available at <http://www.psb.org>

Kentucky Historical Society
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An Agency of the Education, Arts and Humanities Cabinet
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